

# 18th-Century France: Chardin and Portraiture

## *The Academy*

The Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture was established in 1648 to centralize control over the arts, and in eighteenth-century France it dominated artistic life. Only members could receive royal commissions or participate in the official Salons, the Academy's influential exhibitions.

Full membership required the Academy's acceptance of an artist's "masterpiece." Painters were received as specialists in a particular type of painting. In the strict hierarchy promoted by the Academy, "history painting," which included religious, mythological, and historical subjects, was the most highly esteemed. Next came portraiture, then landscape and still life. This ranking suggested that some types of painting required an artist to use his mind as well as his eyes.

## *Chardin: Great Magician of the Everyday World*

Although held in low esteem by the Academy, still lifes and scenes of everyday activity were quite popular. The greatest painter of these subjects was Jean-Siméon Chardin. Denis Diderot, the period's foremost critic, called Chardin the "great magician," suggesting the seemingly effortless harmony of color and composition with which Chardin imparted gravity to ordinary objects and occupations.

Chardin had already acquired a considerable reputation when he was accepted by the Academy—the same day he applied—as a painter of "animals and fruit." After a friendly gibe from a fellow artist about the lowly status of his work, Chardin began about 1730 to paint figures, mostly women and children, engaged in simple acts of middle-class life. His treatment of the domestic world was unprecedented in France. Lively Dutch and Flemish scenes of peasant life, with embedded morals about vanity and the impermanence of worldly goods, had long been popular with French collectors. Chardin, however, depicted a more contemplative and self-contained world, painting moments of arrested motion. His subjects, absorbed in activities that require quiet concentration, take on the quality of still life.

Chardin worked laboriously from arrangements directly in front of him and rarely made the detailed drawings that were standard academic practice. Slowly building up thick layers of paint, he created colors of depth and complexity by mixing different hues and varied his brushstrokes to match the texture of each surface.

Because his technique was slow and difficult—and the prices brought by his subjects low—Chardin copied his compositions often. In his time, creativity was in an artist's original conception, so subsequent copies were no less valuable. Many of the works here exist in several versions, all painted by Chardin himself.

## *Portraits and New Patrons*

Portraiture grew in importance during the eighteenth century and attracted larger numbers of first-rank painters. It was so lucrative that the Academy sought to discourage its popularity—which came at the expense of history painting—by lowering official prices. Demand stemmed largely from a new and wealthy middle class. There was, in addition, a growing interest in individual psychology, as Enlightenment thinkers made man and his perfection the focus of systematic inquiry. This was reflected not only in the sheer numbers of portraits produced but also in the evolution of new portrait types, which from about 1740 presented pensive sitters in surroundings that reflected their interests as much as their incomes.



**Jean-Siméon Chardin**  
French, 1699–1779

### *Soap Bubbles*

about 1733–1734. Oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. John W. Simpson 1942.5.1

This is one of several versions of *Soap Bubbles*, Chardin's earliest work to include human figures. A boy concentrates his full attention on a quivering bubble, which seems ready to slip from his pipe. Eighteenth-century French viewers would have recognized the soap bubble from Dutch and Flemish painting as a symbol of life's fragility and the vanity of worldly pursuits.

Chardin frequently exhibited and probably conceived of his works in pairs, called "pendants." He used them to reinforce or amplify meaning and alternated them to shift the emphasis. At different times this painting was used as a pendant with two other works, versions of which hang in this gallery. In *House of Cards* another boy focuses on a similarly idle pursuit, while in the *Young Governess* a girl pays close attention to duty instead.

Two paintings here by Charles Amédée Vanloo also explore this subject. Vanloo paired his own *Soap Bubbles* with the *Magic Lantern*, where children (perhaps his own) play with a *camera obscura*. This artists' tool, whose mirrors produced a faint reflected image, suggested, like the soap bubble, the transitory nature of life.



### *Still Life with Game*

1760/1765. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.36

When Chardin returned to still-life painting late in his life, he employed a freer style than the more refined technique he had used for figures. His contemporaries painted dead game with *trompe-l'oeil* (literally, "fool the

eye") realism and great virtuosity, but Chardin chose instead to evoke the limp plumpness of these animals with softness and a certain ambiguity. An array of tones spreads like light diffusing across this canvas. Vivid highlights of turquoise and coral in the feathers punctuate the warm neutrals and are echoed with ever diminishing strength from left to right. The feathers are painted with smooth scalloping arcs, while the fur of the rabbits is made with thicker paint puckered on the surface. Approach the painting, as the critic Diderot suggested visitors to the Salon exhibitions do, and the forms of the game disappear into a mosaic of pure paint. "Move away," Diderot continued, "and everything creates itself and reappears."



### *The Attentive Nurse*

probably 1738. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.37

Through the simple action depicted here, Chardin reveals dignity and beauty in everyday life. The woman's expression as she concentrates on her task suggests that her thoughts are elsewhere, perhaps with the invalid whose meal she is preparing (Chardin lost his first wife and young daughter to illness). Each object receives careful treatment from the artist's brush. The table setting is a harmony of white tones: jug, tablecloth, egg, and plate, each subtly different. Every pot, each piece of crockery is palpably present. As Diderot wrote of Chardin, "it is not white, red, or black pigment that you mix on your palette, it is the very substance of objects."

Chardin's modest subjects—like this and that of the *Kitchen Maid* nearby—were extremely popular with all classes of society, including the aristocracy. Perhaps their appeal rested in their sense of order, of things in their proper place. Chardin anticipated the popularity of paintings of "sensibility," which increased from the 1740s on, telling a colleague that "one uses color, but one paints with sentiment."



**Jean-Siméon Chardin**  
French, 1699–1779

*House of Cards*

1735. Oil on canvas. Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.90

Like its occasional pendant, *Soap Bubbles*, this painting points to idleness and the vanity of worldly constructions. The boy’s apron suggests he is a household servant called to clear up after a gaming party. Instead, he uses the cards—folded to prevent their being marked and used again—to build the most impermanent of structures. The stability of the painting’s triangular composition freezes the moment, as the boy is poised,

breathless, to remove his hand and test the fragile balance of his construction. In the open drawer the jack of hearts hints at rascality.

When Chardin showed this painting or *Soap Bubbles* with the *Young Governess*, also in this room, he could contrast the boys’ idleness with the girl’s industry and underscore the fleeting nature of the objects that held their attention. The point is made especially clear by the nearly identical poses of the girl and of the young servant seen here. Both appear against warm, neutral backgrounds whose subtly blended tones create depth and set off bright accents of red and blue.



**Nicolas de Largillierre**  
French, 1656–1746

*Elizabeth Throckmorton*

1729. Oil on canvas. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1964.20.1

The formality and clear outlines of Largillierre’s *Young Man with His Tutor* in this gallery continue traditions of the baroque “grand manner.” When that work was painted, late in the reign of Louis XIV, such depictions of boys with their teachers were popular for royal portraits. However, the identity, even the nationality, of this sitter remains unknown. The rich colors and textures and the precision of sensitive detail in the tutor’s face reveal the influence of Flemish paint-

ing. Largillierre spent his youth in Antwerp and London, where the great Flemish portraitist, Anthony van Dyck, had been court painter.

During Largillierre’s long life portraiture evolved to satisfy new patrons from the wealthy bourgeoisie. Elizabeth Throckmorton was an English Catholic whose family left England rather than acknowledge its Protestant church. She entered an Augustinian house in Paris and served four times as Mother Superior before her death in 1760. Largillierre’s great facility with color shows in the complex pleats of her robe, the transparency of her dark veil, and the delicacy of her complexion. The fragile hues and soft atmosphere complement her calm beauty.

**Jean-Marc Nattier**  
French, 1685–1766

*Joseph Bonnier de la Mosson*

1745. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.30

Nattier entered the Academy as a history painter, but after financial losses in a shaky market scheme he turned to a more profitable career as a portraitist. Before long he was the most fashionable painter in Paris. His daughter wrote that he had “reconciled the two major branches of art” for he specialized in historical portraits, casting his sitters in mythological or literary roles.

*Madame de Caumartin as Hebe*, also seen in this gallery, is one of several portraits Nattier painted of women as the ever-young cupbearer of the gods. Hebe’s father, Zeus, appears in the guise of an eagle, and the pitcher, which holds the nectar of eternal youth, echoes the shape of ancient vessels then being recovered from Pompeii. Like a mythological figure, Madame de Caumartin is timeless and faultless, her perfection mirrored by the glasslike smoothness of Nattier’s painting technique. Casanova marveled over Nattier’s indefinable ability to make even plain women beautiful without sacrificing truth.

A younger contemporary, on the other hand, ridiculed Nattier’s mythological portraits as absurd and artificial. Though painted earlier, a more “modern” approach can be seen in the portrait of Joseph de Bonnier. Bonnier was the perfect eighteenth-century *amateur*, whose wealth allowed him the leisure to study nature’s curiosities. His large collection, open to the public, held cabinets devoted to anatomy, chemistry, pharmacy, and mechanical engineering. Nattier’s portrait shows a man of lively intelligence, informally dressed and in a relaxed pose, surrounded by the objects that held his interest: books about natural history (perhaps a publication he sponsored), jars of biological specimens, and mechanical models.



**Jean-Baptiste Greuze**  
French, 1725–1805

*Ange-Laurent de Lalive de Jully*

probably 1759. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.8

Lalive de Jully was a wealthy art collector and amateur artist. Unlike many other Parisian collectors, who favored works of Rembrandt, Rubens, and the Renaissance masters,

Lalive de Jully made a conscious effort to collect contemporary French artists. He is shown here with a suite of furniture in the latest neoclassical style. Rectilinear and decorated with motifs from ancient Greek and Roman architecture, this style would become increasingly popular, supplanting the sinuous curves of the rococo.

Lalive de Jully was an early admirer of Greuze, who showed this portrait of him in the 1759 Salon. He was among the first to appreciate the moralizing subjects for which Greuze was primarily known. These melodramatic works, which later generations dismissed as overly sentimental, were greatly admired by eighteenth-century audiences and are now recognized as having played an important role in shifting France’s taste from the frivolity of rococo to the more sober styles popular in the last decades of the century. There is a hint of this seriousness in the momentary directness of Lalive de Jully’s gaze, as he turns from his harp to engage the viewer.

**Jean-Antoine Houdon**  
French, 1741–1828

*Voltaire*

1778. Marble. Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.240

When Voltaire (1694–1778) returned to Paris in February 1778 from decades of exile in Switzerland, he was met with tumultuous welcome in the streets of Paris. Crowds pulled his carriage and surrounded his house, clamoring for a glimpse of this skeptical *philosophe*, who was a playwright, novelist, historian, satirist, champion of the oppressed—and the century’s greatest wit. He was eighty-four years old, and the exertion killed him before the end of May.

During those few months Voltaire sat several times for Houdon, who portrayed him in busts and as a seated figure, in classical drapery and contemporary dress. Voltaire became Houdon’s most popular subject and one of his most compelling characterizations. This version, which is the simplest, seems also the closest to life. Its realism—sagging skin and bald head—has the austere truth of portrait busts from republican Rome. This conception was probably the basis for other interpretations, like the wigged Voltaire nearby. Voltaire’s expression seems to change as the light, or our point of view, shifts. By turns he is wise or sarcastic, understanding or impatient, engaged or introspective. But always, his features, especially his eyes, are animated by intelligence and wit. Houdon developed an effective way to capture the depth and glint of an eye in stone. Within the hollow iris, spokes radiate from a deeply drilled pupil, and just under the lid, Houdon left a tiny peg of stone to suggest the reflection of light.

*The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.*

© 1992 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington  
May 1992 (1 ed)